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Published January 21, 2007

State says young ex-con won't get extra services

Controversy erupts after reports of rent, college tuition aid

By L.L. Brasier and Jack Kresnak
Special to the State Journal

DETROIT - On his first day of freedom in almost a decade, Nathaniel Abraham was the focal point of a controversy after media reports that he was receiving special treatment, with state taxpayers picking up his living expenses and a four-year college tuition bill.



(Photo by Rashaun Rucker/Detroit Free Press)
Free: Nathaniel Abraham, 20, leaves Oakland County court after being freed Thursday in Pontiac. Abraham, as a boy in 1997, became the youngest person in Michigan to be tried as an adult for first-degree murder.

It turned out to be not true.

"The Oakland County prosecutor has misinformed the public about the Nathaniel Abraham case," state Department of Human Services spokeswoman Karen Stock said Friday.

She referred to comments by Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley that were reported in various media outlets that the Department of Human Services (DHS) had committed to paying for Abraham's furnished apartment for two years and covering four years of tuition at Delta College, which offers two-year degrees.

Carley did not return calls Friday to the Free Press.

Abraham, 21, was released Thursday from a Bay City halfway house where he served the last six months of a sentence for killing 18-year old Ronnie Greene Jr. in 1997. At 11, Abraham became the youngest person in Michigan to be charged as an adult with murder.

"The state has not provided him with a two-year commitment for services," Stock said Friday. "We have not put down a deposit for his housing."

There were also media reports that Abraham would be eligible for his college tuition to be paid through Michigan Rehabilitation Services through age 25.

Delta College officials said Friday that Abraham took two classes last fall but dropped both. His tuition was paid through the Adjudicated Youth Project, using state and federal money.

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January 20, 2007

Lawyers, state clash on aid plan for Abraham

Lawyers: Officials agreed Jan. 8 to provide free rent, tuition; State: Deal wasn't final but he may still be eligible for help

Maureen Feighan / The Detroit News

Despite the continued assertions of the principal lawyers in the case, state officials said Friday they did not agree to provide convicted murderer Nathaniel Abraham with two years of housing and four years of college tuition.

Abraham, released Thursday, could still be eligible for such help, state officials said.

"We have no authorization to speak for him about specifics that may or may not be done for him," said Laura Champagne, chief deputy director of the Department of Human Services. "At this point, the responsibility is his to take a look at various programs."

Two attorneys say that state officials on Jan. 8 outlined the plan, which Oakland County Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley addressed in court Thursday.

"It was only once your paper published it that they go ballistic because it makes them look bad," she said.

Abraham's attorney concurred. "They had it set in place," said Daniel Bagdade. "It sounded to me like it was a done deal."

If things changed, the lawyers were never notified, both said.

On Jan. 8, Abraham's attorneys, Carley and officials from both Oakland County and Bay City -- where Abraham is now living in a furnished apartment -- met to discuss services Abraham would receive after his release Thursday.

Carley and Bagdade said they were told that Abraham would receive both housing and tuition assistance through various state programs, including a pilot program for foster care children who leave the system at age 18.

State officials said Friday that they never committed to certain services for Abraham, who shot 18-year-old Ronnie Greene Jr. when he was 11, making national headlines because he faced the possibility of being sentenced as an adult. They said they did look at the pilot foster program but decided it wasn't a good fit. They insist the only services they provided as part of Abraham's release was helping find him an apartment, said Karen Stock, a human services spokeswoman.

Stock said the department even misspoke when its own officials said Thursday that the state paid Abraham's security deposit and first month's rent. She said youths in the juvenile justice system are expected to work to earn their own money for housing when they leave.

Services not out of question

The services aren't out of the question, they acknowledged. If he's eligible, Michigan Rehabilitation Services offers an employment training program that includes tuition assistance for youths with disabilities who have had brushes with the law.

"Now that he's 21 and out of the system and if he has a need and wants to make application (for various services), he can do that," Stock said. "If he qualifies for a program, he may get it. But the idea that this is a done deed and all laid out for him is not the case."

According to Carley, more than 10 people were at the Jan. 8 meeting at a human services office in Bloomfield Hills.

She said human services officials outlined a plan to offer Abraham two years of housing assistance through a federally funded program called the Foster Care Demonstration Project, run by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. He'd be offered caseworker assistance -- even though as an adult he would no longer be eligible for it -- through Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiatives, and up to four years of tuition through Michigan Rehabilitation Services.

Carley acknowledges the plan outraged her and she "got a little hot under the collar" because she was angry that a spot designed for an abused or neglected child from foster care would go to Abraham.

"I thought it was ridiculous that we were using money for a neglect ward for a convicted murderer," Carley said.

"I'm not the person who came up with this plan," she said. "I didn't sentence him. I didn't do any of these things. I was just trying to protect the community. I think the public deserves to know that this is the program that the state of Michigan wanted him to go to."

No one contradicted her, she said, when she told Circuit Judge Eugene Moore about the services Abraham would be offered upon his release Thursday.

She says the state backpedaled because of the backlash.

Bagdade argues that the 21-year-old needs assistance.

"This is a young man who spent his entire childhood behind bars and he's being thrust into society without adult supervision," he said. "I just hope the state comes through."

State sees meeting differently

State officials interpret that Jan. 8 meeting differently.

They said they discussed programs for which Abraham may be eligible but Bureau of Juvenile Justice Facilities Director Felix Sharpe "clarified that this was just something we were looking into, but it was not concluded and we did not know if Nathaniel would be eligible," said Stock, who did not attend.

Sharpe was not available to be interviewed Friday.

Champagne said public scrutiny over the services Abraham receives is frustrating, not helpful.

"I think what we really need to do is have the community balance the need he has for privacy and the responsibility we all have as a community to embrace him and help make him productive," she said. "The focus on whether he's going to get this program or that program is counterproductive."

The state contends that under federal law, whenever a juvenile offender is released they're required to have some kind of transition plan in place. Carley said that's true, but those plans can't extend past an offender's 21st birthday, which the rent and tuition help would.

Some state lawmakers and dozens of Detroit News readers expressed outrage that Abraham -- who has already cost the state more than \$850,000 over the last 10 years -- would still be getting assistance even after he's no longer in the state's custody.

"I understand the logic that they're trying to help people turn their lives around," said state Rep. David Law, R-Commerce Township. "But there's a lot of good people who don't commit crimes who don't get free housing or tuition."

Barbara MacKenzie, regional director of Lutheran Child & Family Service of Michigan, said she can understand people being angry but the state has already made a huge investment in Abraham. She said often the state fails kids coming right out of juvenile facilities with no services.

"I see it as an investment to protect the investment we've already made," MacKenzie said. "We've got two lives here and I don't think even Ronnie Greene's family would want to see two lives destroyed."

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State: Abraham Not Receiving Paid Housing, Tuition

By the Associated Press
January 20, 2007

A state official on Friday denied a prosecutor's statement that convicted killer Nathaniel Abraham is receiving taxpayer-paid housing and college tuition now that he has been released from state supervision.

"We are able to confirm that the state is not providing a two-year commitment for services (for Abraham). We have not put down a deposit for his housing. We are also not providing housing assistance to him that was meant to help foster children," Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services, told The Associated Press on Friday.

"We're also not providing him with four years of college tuition."

Deborah Carley, chief deputy prosecutor in Oakland County, on Friday stood by her statements that the state said it would provide the housing and tuition. She said that's what she was told at a Jan. 8 meeting at a DHS office in Bloomfield Hills, and that she said in court Thursday that she felt it was an inappropriate use of funds and that DHS officials did not offer to respond.

Carley told The Detroit News that the state now was backpedaling to avoid negative public response to her statements about its assistance to Abraham.

The News reported Friday that Abraham, who turned 21 on Friday, is living in a furnished Bay City apartment and will receive four years of free tuition at nearby Delta College.

The story said Abraham, who was 11 when he was convicted of second-degree murder in the 1997 shooting death of a Pontiac man, was receiving the services under the Foster Care Demonstration Project. The state-funded program is designed to help young adults in Wayne County who are phased out of the foster care system at age 18 but still need state assistance.

Carley told The News that the DHS had ordered that Abraham be given a spot in the foster program, even though he is no longer a ward of the state and not eligible for such services.

Sorbet, the DHS spokeswoman, said Friday that the state does offer help to young adults making the transition from state supervision to independence and that Abraham could apply for such assistance, Sorbet said.

"We do work with them to help them identify housing, help them identify employment and also other resources that they might find a need for after they exit (from the state's) care," she said.

Those resources include food assistance, Medicaid, emergency relief and cash assistance. Abraham would need to apply for that assistance like anyone else, Sorbet said. She said Abraham also was referred to Michigan Rehabilitative Services, which works with youths who have a specific disability and are low-income.

Asked how confusion might have arisen over Abraham's housing and college tuition, Sorbet said, "I think there may have been a misunderstanding. There was a meeting where they were talking about lots of options, and some people may have thought some of the options were more concrete than they were."

Daniel Bagdade, Abraham's lawyer, told The AP that he believed Abraham was receiving taxpayer-paid assistance as described by Carley, but added, "All of that was worked out without my knowledge and outside of my presence."

A judge released Abraham from state supervision on Thursday, more than nine years after he used a rifle to shoot and kill Ronnie Greene, 18, outside a Pontiac convenience store. Abraham was held for six years at the maximum-security W.J. Maxey Training School in Livingston County.

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Cost to rehabilitate Nate - \$1 million

State disputes county's contention that it will pay for Abraham's apartment, schooling

Of The Oakland Press

PONTIAC - People are still talking about Nathaniel Abraham's fur coat, hot pink shirt and shoes. Even more shocking to some is that taxpayers might foot the bill for his apartment and college tuition after about \$1 million has already been spent to rehabilitate the convicted killer.

"It's disgusting," said 51-year-old Robert W. Baer of Waterford Township.

Abraham, who turned 21 Friday, walked out of court Thursday, tasting freedom for the first time since childhood.

He was 11 when he shot 18-yearold Ronnie Greene Jr. with a rifle in 1997 outside a Pontiac party store. He was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced as a juvenile. He spent the last several years as a ward of the state.

His rehabilitation included access to therapists, mentors and other professionals, as well as educational and job training at four separate facilities. Oakland County Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley estimates the total cost at about \$1 million.

Carley said officials from state agencies have agreed to provide him further assistance, though they claimed Friday that they never made such promises.

Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said Friday that the agency hasn't chipped in at all for his housing and hasn't agreed that it will. Abraham can apply for help like any other state resident, she said.

Carley said she was told at a Jan. 8 meeting at a Department of Human Services office in Bloomfield Hills that the department has placed him in a Foster Care Demonstration Project, a Wayne County pilot program designed to help foster children aging out of the system at 18.

Under the program, Abraham would receive two years of free rent, would be eligible for food stamps and receive emergency services, such as groceries. Carley was told Michigan Rehabilitation Services, another state agency, would cover four years of college tuition until he's 25.

"What offends me is that the time and the money is not being spent on children in this state and this county who are abused and neglected by their parents, but instead being spent on a convicted murder," she said.

Sorbet said the pilot program was one of several possible resources for Abraham discussed. But she said it hasn't yet gotten off the ground. Whether Abraham will be part of it needs to be further evaluated, she said.

Lori Donlan, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth, the umbrella group over Rehabilitation Services, said the agency has not committed to paying for his schooling.

Carley said she discussed the plan, including the two years of free rent and free education, in court Thursday in front of Department of Human Services representatives who did not correct her.

County Executive L. Brooks Patterson said state officials are just backtracking now "because of the public outrage" over the assistance plans.

Abraham's attorney, Daniel Bagdade, did not return a message seeking comment.

The murder conviction will stay on Abraham's record. He's not on probation. No one is legally required to check on his progress, though many of the people who have worked with him over the years have said that they'll keep in touch.

Young people convicted of serious offenses are often released from the juvenile justice system at 19 or 21, depending on the charge. While they're eligible to apply for food stamps, Carley said she's never heard of a case where the state provided housing afterward.

Carley said Abraham has received every state service available. He's been treated differently from other juvenile offenders, she said.

"There's a certain temptation that the state doesn't want to be the responsible party should Nate reoffend," she said.

Abraham has a six-month lease on an apartment in Bay City and a maintenance job.

The story of Abraham's release made national headlines. It was a hot topic on radio talk shows and around water coolers and kitchen tables in Metro Detroit.

"I have no idea why we as taxpayers are paying for him to live," said Sally Petherbridge, a 50-year-old resident of Ortonville. "My husband is losing his job. I've cut back on all my expenses, and here this punk is going to school on my tax dollars?"

Abraham's picture on the front of Friday's Oakland Press - which showed him wearing the flashy suit, a fedora tilted to one side, a fur coat and a slight smile as he left the courthouse - prompted several calls from angry readers.

Some said Abraham showed a gross lack of respect for the victim's family.

"He looks like he's got a smug look walking away from a horrible thing he did. Look at the way he's dressed. He doesn't look like a man with any remorse," Baer said.

Abraham's sister, Michelle Peoples-Dudley, said people shouldn't judge Abraham by his appearance.

"When I first seen him (Thursday in court), my first words were, 'He looked nice,' " Peoples-Dudley said. "I didn't think that his attire represented if he was remorseful or not."

Abraham's family members have said Abraham has matured into a responsible man who plans to use his experience to help others.

Greene's family has said that Abraham has never told them he's sorry.

Peoples-Dudley has said she hopes people are able to forgive her brother.

"We all must forgive to move on and have a productive and healthy life ...," Peoples-Dudley said. "We're not asking no one to forget, but we're just saying, 'Can you forgive?' "

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Oakland Press Editorial

January 20, 2007

Question remains as to what kind of citizen Abraham will be

Web-posted Jan 20, 2007

Although the trial is long over and his sentence has been served, the jury is still out on Nathaniel Abraham. The Pontiac native who shot and killed a man when he was only 11, turned 21 this week, and he was freed from the court's jurisdiction Thursday after a hearing before Oakland County Chief Probate Judge Eugene Arthur Moore.

The question of what kind of citizen will Nate be remains unanswered.

His backers, such as attorney Daniel Bagdade, obviously are optimistic for the young man.

In fact, his time in the spotlight might not yet be over. Bagdade says he has had calls from numerous national media interested in Abraham's story, including Oprah Winfrey, 60 Minutes and People magazine.

Bagdade admits Abraham's "situation is so far out of the ordinary, it is going to take years to tell what his background brings." The attorney, who has represented Abraham since the beginning, adds he's confident Abraham will avoid trouble.

However, other officials aren't so sure.

Deborah Carley, the deputy chief prosecutor who has handled Abraham's case for years, has said she has concerns. She says she hopes he stays out of trouble and leads a productive life. Carley concedes Abraham has participated in years of therapy, anger management, self-control counseling and other programs while in state custody.

Generally, she says Abraham "definitely has an uphill battle."

The young man's story started on Oct. 29, 1997, when Ronnie Greene Jr., an 18-year-old Pontiac man, was shot to death outside a party store. State law had been changed that year, allowing prosecutors to charge juveniles as adults in serious cases, which is what Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca did. He was the first juvenile prosecuted under the law.

Though charged with first-degree murder, a jury convicted Abraham of second-degree murder. But Moore sentenced Abraham as a juvenile, meaning Abraham could not be held beyond age 21.

Abraham has not been a "perfect" youth during the past 10 years but admittedly, the incidents are relatively mild.

He reportedly had argued with peers and staff members at the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School in Whitmore Lake, where he lived for several years. In one incident, he became angry at the staff during a basketball game and reacted with profanity and threats. The outburst raised concerns about Abraham's ability to control his temper.

Also, while at Parmenter House, a halfway facility in Bay City, Abraham reportedly took cleaning supplies without asking, supposedly to tidy up a friend's apartment. He once was late, and he had a cell phone while in a stage of the program when phones aren't allowed.

But also while at Parmenter, he passed the written test to get his driver's license and took a business class at a community college.

He reportedly will be living in Bay City and currently is working for Goodwill Industries. His attorney says Abraham has not given up on schooling and has talent as a writer of poetry, lyrics and short stories.

We certainly hope Abraham establishes himself as a solid citizen, blends into society and lives a good, productive life.

It's just no one knows for sure if that's the road he'll take - it's up to Abraham now.

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January 20, 2007

Laura Berman

Abraham outfit cries: 'I'm free'



The Outfit.

Until a few minutes before Nathaniel Abraham's court hearing Thursday, Daniel Bagdade, his lawyer, had never seen it. Now he wishes he could forget it.

Not since he was a slight boy of 12, dressed in orange prison garb and leg chains, has Nathaniel Abraham received so much attention. Front page photographs in newspapers, talk radio air time, on-line forum buzz.

Abraham's ivory-and-pink-pinstriped suit and hot pink alligator shoes are the talk of the town, like Jennifer Lopez in her cutaway emerald Grammy dress or Bjork dressed as a swan.

At The Broadway, the downtown Detroit haberdashery, Nathaniel Abraham's suit was Friday's furor.

"Some thought he was over-the-top," said Wallace Bell, the store's manager. "And some thought he looked really sharp."

What you couldn't say about Abraham's attire was that you didn't notice it, or that it was bland, middle-of-the-road or even vaguely corporate.

"Appropriate" was another word that did not spring to mind.

These were not the duds of a young man preparing to go quietly into the world, never to be heard from again. These clothes screamed a message -- and the message was at odds with the sober and earnest vocabulary of Abraham's professional handlers -- the therapists and counselors and lawyers -- in the courtroom.

It wasn't humble or self-effacing or even earnest.

Whether he was deemed a fashion victim or applauded for looking sharp, Abraham's boldly chosen attire was clearly a siren song, a call for notice. The suit, the shoes, the broad-brimmed hat festooned with a wide pink band topped with a rabbit coat were flamboyant.

On radio shows and in chat rooms, some contended that the clothes signaled disrespect, or provided clear signals that Abraham is, after 10 years in custody, headed back down the road to crime. Nathaniel Abraham is no stranger to courthouses: He knows what he's expected to wear.

For 10 years, he's been dressed in the uniform of juvenile detention: khaki pants and polo shirt.

That's how he was dressed on Jan. 8, the last time Dan Bagdade met with his client.

"It is our policy to advise (the youth in detention) on the appropriate attire for court appearances," says Maureen Sorbet, the spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Human Services.

But we don't have to read the absolute worst into Nathaniel Abraham's dress.

After years of toeing the line, wearing "appropriate" clothes, he opted to show off. To preen for the cameras. "He was saying, 'I'm free,'" says The Broadway's Bell.

And isn't that Abraham's latest offense?

Those of us who know and follow the rules -- of law or fashion -- don't shout or flaunt our freedom. We're familiar with constraints a 21-year-old raised in a training school can't easily imagine. We're free -- but. Free and bound by strict yet invisible codes that count, even when they have nothing to do with jail.

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Port Huron Times Herald

January 22, 2007

Talk to me:

Geri from St. Clair: "I cannot even adequately express how extremely furious I am over the treatment of Nathaniel Abraham. The state is now going to set him up in a furnished apartment and pay for him to go to college until he reaches age 25. There is something totally wrong with this picture. The state is treating him now as if they have done something wrong in incarcerating him for murdering a man. This is just not right."

I agree, Geri. Abraham was place in the Foster Care Demonstration Project, a pilot program that is supposed to assist Wayne County foster- care children after they reach age 18. Abraham, who was convicted of murder at 11, isn't eligible for the program, but strings apparently were pulled.



What do you recall when you were 11?

January 21, 2007

BY MITCH ALBOM

FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Eleven years old.

I was in the fifth grade. I wore black sneakers. I rode a Sting-Ray bicycle. I climbed trees with friends. I had never kissed a girl. I ate Cocoa Puffs for breakfast. That summer I went to sleepaway camp and a man landed on the moon. When I got home, I built a plastic model of Apollo 11 and kept it in my bedroom.

Eleven years old. I have been thinking about how young that is, in light of arguments last week over how old it is.

The first case concerned a boy named Shawn Hornbeck. When he was 11, he was kidnapped in Missouri. For four years, his parents, relatives, neighbors and authorities searched for him and prayed for him.

Then, 10 days ago, Shawn and another young boy were found in the apartment of a 41-year-old man, who has since been charged with kidnapping. The man lived only 50 miles from where Shawn had gone missing. He reportedly had been passing Shawn off as his son. The boy had been seen by neighbors riding his bicycle, playing with friends, seeming, they said, pretty normal.

When Shawn, now 15, was returned to his rightful family, they both cried tears of joy. His mother, on television, called it "a miracle."

But soon after, the questions arose: Why didn't the boy speak up sooner? Why didn't he try to escape? Why didn't he make a phone call -- since he supposedly had access to phones? Why didn't he just, at some point, walk away?

After all, he was 11 when he was taken. That's old enough to know better, isn't it?

The youngest murderer

At the same time Shawn Hornbeck was in the news, so was Nathaniel Abraham. He also made headlines when he was 11. Abraham was that age when fired a .22-caliber shotgun and killed Ronnie Greene Jr., 18, outside a Pontiac convenience store. Abraham, at the time, said he was firing at trees. Nonetheless, he became the youngest person convicted of murder in the United States. He was convicted as an adult, but sentenced as a juvenile, meaning he could be held only until his 21st birthday.

He turned 21 last week.

He was released.

And old questions were heard anew. Why was Nathaniel Abraham tried as a juvenile? He was 11, wasn't he? He knew right from wrong, didn't he? He'd had a rap sheet of minor scuffles with the law, didn't he? How could he be considered a child when he so cold-bloodedly killed a man?

Ronnie Greene's sister, Nichole Edwards, spoke to me about Abraham's release.

"I don't feel that he has been rehabilitated," she said. "... When he got sentenced, I felt he should have got the blended sentence" -- adult and juvenile -- "so today, instead of setting him free ... a judge would have looked back and seen if he'd progressed any. ...

"My brother was only 18. He didn't have a chance. Look at what" Abraham's family "is gaining today. We have nothing to look forward to. The only thing I can do is go to the cemetery and look down on my brother's plot."

The variables of age

So how old -- or how young -- is age 11? In the Shawn Hornbeck case, was he old enough to have taken action? Many claim that once a child is abducted, he can be frightened, forced or even brainwashed into silence. It is hard to know, they say, how a developing mind absorbs such a horrific situation.

The same case is made by those who feel Nathaniel Abraham was too young to fully comprehend the consequences of his actions. An 11-year-old may know a gun can kill, he may know killing is bad, but he may not fully comprehend how he becomes a killer by pulling the trigger.

Personally? Part of me wants to side with those who say, come on, who's kidding who here? By 11, you know not to be firing guns -- at trees or anything else -- and by 11 you know, if you're abducted, that if you have enough freedom to ride a bike or play unsupervised, you have enough freedom to call home collect.

But then I remember the year I turned 11. I remember playing in tree houses and having a high, squeaky voice. I remember, occasionally, still watching cartoons on television.

And maybe because I must use the word "remember," I have forgotten how young 11 really is.

Contact **MITCH ALBOM** at 313-223-4581 or malbom@freepress.com. Catch "The Mitch Albom Show" 5-7 p.m. weekdays on WJR-AM (760).

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Traverse City Record Eagle

01/21/2007

Week in Review

Child care provider being investigated

TRAVERSE CITY — A Grand Traverse County-based child care provider is under investigation by the Grand Traverse Sheriff's Department and the Michigan Department of Human Services for alleged child abuse.

Miroslava Coronado filed a complaint with the sheriff's department this month that alleges her 7-month-old son suffered bruises to his leg and stomach area as well as a raw nose and lip while at the home of her former child care provider.

Officials with the Department of Human Services confirmed Tuesday the department initiated an investigation, but refused further comment.

Pam Ward, executive director for Northwest Michigan 4C Council, said the agency has referred parents to the care provider since 1996.

"We only refer to providers that are in good standing with licensing and I have no information that she is not," Ward said.

Not every accusation of child abuse is valid, but all are investigated, Ward said.

Autopsy finds baby had 30 broken bones

Created: 1/19/2007 5:40:13 PM

Updated: 1/19/2007 7:51:32 PM

Muskegon - A Muskegon mother is charged with child abuse after autopsy results on her dead baby showed more than 30 broken bones.

Linda Marie Walker faces 15 years in prison if convicted. However, she is not being charged with the child's death.

Police say Walker admitted to losing control with the child about two weeks before the baby died.

The coroner's report concludes the injuries did not cause the little girl's death.

Walker is out on bond and is ordered to have no contact with children.

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ClickOnDetroit.com

12-Year-Old Approached En Route To School

POSTED: 10:52 am EST January 22, 2007

UPDATED: 12:42 pm EST January 22, 2007

PONTIAC -- Pontiac police are looking for a man who approached a 12-year-old girl on her way to Lincoln Middle School Monday morning.

The girl said a man in a red truck at the intersection of Douglas Street and Mechanic Street asked her if she wanted a ride.

She answered no and the man drove off.

The girl ran home and told her mother, who called police.

Police said this was the first report of this kind. They said they will work with the school to notify parents about the potential danger.

The school will be sending out letters to parents about the incident.

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Officer Tasered In Traffic Stop Appears In Court

POSTED: 2:12 pm EST January 20, 2007

UPDATED: 2:31 pm EST January 20, 2007

FARMINGTON HILLS, Mich. -- A 12-year Detroit police veteran charged last month with resisting arrest and running a red light has some religious support in his corner.

About 200 members of Detroit's Greater Grace Temple packed into a Farmington Hills courtroom Hills on Friday to show support for police Sgt. David Marshall, who was hit with a stun gun on Dec. 13.

Marshall, who lives in Farmington Hills, was in his uniform when he was shot with a Taser after refusing to give up his gun and later reaching for it, police told the Detroit Free Press.

Marshall's attorney, Arnold Reed, called the incident racial profiling.

"We are here today because we are tired of these kinds of actions by police," said Reed, who was with a crowd of supporters, most of whom came from Greater Grace Temple, where Marshall attends.

Farmington Hills Police Chief William Dwyer said an internal investigation cleared an unidentified 16-year Farmington Hills officer of wrongdoing.

Dwyer said he is disappointed with the officer's actions and said both men should have had more respect for each other.

"If the sergeant and the officer who pulled him over would have been more professional, this would not of happened," Dwyer said.

Marshall also will face child abuse charges, for allegedly hitting his wheelchair-using stepson in a May incident, when he returns to court on April 25, Dwyer said.

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Drug crackdown cuts burglaries 38%

By JOHN EBY / Dowagiac Daily News
Friday, January 19, 2007 10:05 AM EST

CASSOPOLIS - Adapt or die.

Or, in the case of Cass County's well-armed and paranoid drug dealers, if you can't stand the "heat," get out of the "kitchen" or risk cooling off in the slammer.

"We've put a lot of heat on these people the past two years," Sheriff's Capt. Lyndon Parrish said Thursday in presenting the Cass County Drug Team's 2006 annual report to the Board of Commissioners.

"They either get smarter or they go to jail."

"I think we've gotten a good return on our investment," Sheriff Joseph M. Underwood Jr. added.

"I think the drug team's doing a fantastic job," Commissioner Minnie Warren, D-Pokagon Township, commented. "I do, too," agreed Vice Chairman Ron Francis, R-Cassopolis, who conducted the meeting in the absence of Chairman Bob Wagel, whose mother-in-law passed away.

At one bust made after Parrish and Det. Sgt. David Toxopeus of Dowagiac Police Department shared their report on 2005 activities with Dowagiac Rotary Club last January, contraband confiscated included this newspaper's article on their remarks.

"They keep an eye on us. They want to know what's going on, too" Parrish said. "You can buy little surveillance systems at Wal-Mart. We see a lot of those. They change their habits. In one of the villages near here, they figured out we were recording" undercover buys, "so now, they don't talk. They change their tactics, we change ours."

A tougher pseudoephedrine law, which limited purchases to two packages, leaves meth makers shopping from store to store and law enforcement combing pill lists to identify targets.

Adding two canine units helped. Deputy Tim Gondeck's four-legged partner, GiGi, sniffed out marijuana hidden deep inside a rusty door during one of their 173 deployments.

Law enforcement authorities sold the 2004 millage to taxpayers by connecting a narcotics crackdown with crime reduction.

"We put a lot of people in jail the past two years," Parrish said, "and I think there's a direct correlation with why we've had a 38-percent decrease in burglaries. We don't find a lot of meth labs, but a lot of meth clean-ups, which are (toxic) dump sites along the road. What we saw in 2006, through October, we were down a lot," then meth started cooking again as drug dealers figured out ways around tougher laws.

"A lot of people we put in jail are back out," Parrish said. "We're seeing old names, but we're not seeing a lot of new ones. We're not known anymore as a place where they won't get caught. We've got a very proactive team to go after them."

In eastern Cass County, which is more rural, methamphetamine and marijuana are the prevalent narcotics, compared to crack cocaine and marijuana on the west side of the county.

Parrish anecdotally highlighted some of 2006's noteworthy cases, such as the citizens who drove marijuana from Mexico into Silver Creek Township taped to the undersides of vehicles.

"When we entered the house," he said, "the first thing we saw were the guns," loaded assault-style weapons leaning against a door. "Quite a bit of marijuana and cash inside the house. Children were involved," as evidenced by a baby on a bed with marijuana concealed beneath the mattress.

Referrals to the state Department of Human Services (DHS) dropped in 2006. "Hopefully, that's a good sign," Parrish said. "Less children taken."

A Marcellus Township case "highlights how crime and drugs tend to go together," Parrish said. Contacted by a farmer about the dumping of meth byproducts, the drug team dispatched a detective who lived nearby.

The officer observed a vehicle unloading stuff from a car on a two-track and preparing to burn it - indicative of a meth lab aftermath.

"They had burglarized a house in the area," Parrish said. "Come to find out they had actually burglarized places from Kent County (Grand Rapids) down to Cass County. Over 50 burglaries were solved."

In Calvin Township, a man was selling marijuana from an auto repair business. "Of course, guns were involved," Parrish pointed out. "We find guns almost every time we find drugs."

Mason Township saw a female cancer patient exploited by her family, who sold her prescribed morphine suckers around the neighborhood.

A "pretty nice" marijuana grow operation north of Cassopolis in LaGrange Township "is long-term. It's been going on quite a few years. We were finally able to get into that property and shut him down."

A Dowagiac woman looked like she was growing money, with cash stashed everywhere. "We had to go through every stitch of clothing because she had 20s and 50s stuffed in there. That was a long-term investigation in the city," where cases can usually be wrapped up in a day or two.

Another part of the millage voters approved in the summer of 2004 to expand the joint city-county drug team added a prosecutor for drug cases. "We had six trials last year with 100-percent convictions," Parrish noted.

The team notched 160 arrests and 310 total charges, including 198 felonies and 105 misdemeanors.

The 160 arrests included 112 males (71 whites, 32 blacks and four Hispanics) and 48 females (43 whites and five blacks).

By ZIP Code, Dowagiac paced the county with 61 arrests, followed by: Edwardsburg, 26; Cassopolis, 22; Marcellus, 16; Union, 14; Vandalia, nine; Niles, seven; Three Rivers, three; Jones, two; and South Bend, Ind., one.

Dentist Charged with Medicaid Fraud

MIRS, January 19, 2007

A Rochester Hills dentist faces four years in prison and a \$50,000 fine for collecting \$2.1 million in Medicaid reimbursements for 138 teeth he allegedly never pulled.

Attorney General Mike **COX** charged Billy Shee **LIM**, 57, with 138 counts of Medicaid fraud. Cox filed the felony counts in the 54-B Judicial District Court in East Lansing. Lim was arraigned Thursday before Judge Richard **BALL**. Lim was released on a \$50,000 personal recognizance bond. A preliminary examination has been scheduled for March 8.

The complaint filed by the Attorney General's office against Lim alleges that between 2004 and 2005 Lim filed multiple claims with the Medicaid program for the extraction of primary teeth and other services that were not provided. For those same years, Lim billed the Medicaid program more than \$2.1 million. The investigation revealed that in all 138 counts, the primary teeth Lim claimed to have extracted or worked on were not in the patient's mouth at the time he claimed to be performing services for the patient.



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Published January 21, 2007

Calley: Making progress on communication at the state level

In my last column, I described frustration at the slow pace of communication between myself and the executive branch of government. A few days later, a legislative liaison from the Governor's office stopped by my office to offer assistance.

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I do not know if this response was due to the publication of my last column or simply because the political arm of government is finally waking up after an excessively long Christmas break. Either way, I believe that credit should be given when due.

The Governor's representative was very open, helpful and professional. I was able to share my healthcare proposal with her, and once it is completed in bill form, I will follow up. Just as a reminder, my goal is to identify and enroll the thousands of children in Michigan that qualify for Medicaid, but are simply not signed up.

This could be done, in part, by establishing partnerships between private retailers and the Department of Human Services. The theory is that if the department has a presence where groceries are sold, enrollment would drastically improve. It is practical and customer service oriented.

The liaison also arranged for a telephone call that same day between myself and a representative from the Treasury Department to discuss my concerns about the proposed Michigan Business Tax (Single Business Tax replacement). He was remarkably candid and thorough, qualities not often found in Lansing. In my column a few weeks ago, I listed my concerns about this tax proposal. Below is a summary of the answers I was given.

The Governor's Michigan Business Tax proposal has three components: a tax on income, gross receipts and assets. With respect to a state business assets tax, I was concerned that it constituted "double taxation." However, I would concede that a logical argument can be made that all business taxes constitute "double taxation." The politics of the issue in our current climate is that the Single Business Tax will be replaced with another business tax. That is the framework that almost everyone seems to be operating within. It is also a ground rule that the Governor has set.

With regard to the elimination of part of the personal property tax on the local level in favor of a state assets tax, I asked, "Why not eliminate the entire personal property tax system?" This would relieve local governments of the administrative burden of assessing and collecting it. The state assets tax could then be funneled back to local government and schools, essentially holding them harmless in the transition.

To this he said that completely eliminating the personal property tax would result in too large of a

redistribution of the tax burden from where it is borne today. I do concede that the shift would be substantial; however, part of the problem with Michigan's business tax structure is that it is currently very unevenly distributed. I continue to argue in favor of an equitable distribution of tax burden, regardless of the "winners" to "losers" ratio.

On a constitutional front, I questioned whether or not Michigan has the jurisdiction to tax business assets located in other states as the Governor's proposal calls for. He agreed that a state gross assets tax has never been implemented anywhere in this country; however, he informed me that several other states have net worth taxes that are calculated in similar fashion. He believes that the structures are similar enough that there will be little question of its constitutionality. This may be true, but I am reserving judgment until I have opportunity to speak to state officials in some of those other states.

Even if deemed constitutional, does Michigan really want to go from the Single Business Tax (SBT) to another "one of a kind" business tax structure? I personally hope that the end product does not include the only state assets tax in the country. Simplicity is the key to a fair, equitable and comprehensive tax code. Ideally, a business tax would be based more on profits, with a gross sales component to capture revenue from out-of-state companies doing business here in Michigan.

I am pleased to have had this opportunity to discuss the Governor's proposal in such detail with a person that was able to answer questions in a direct manner. Many of my reservations stand, but at least I better understand where the Governor is coming from.

Unfortunately, I anticipate that we are in store for grand theatrics from both sides of the aisle as the tax debate rages on. Some are already saying that there is a \$3 billion budget deficit that will necessitate a net tax increase. That \$3 billion number comes from taking this year's \$500 million deficit, projecting the same for next year and adding in the \$2 billion typically raised by the SBT.

The real number is actually much less. The SBT will still raise about \$2 billion this year. By next year, a different business tax will be in place that will raise approximately the same amount. That brings the so called \$3 billion deficit down to about \$1 billion. However, an early indication from the upcoming state revenue estimating conference puts the number between \$780 million and \$880 million. A huge challenge to be sure, but a far cry from \$3 billion.

The issues that face this state are difficult enough without over dramatizing them. I will look past rhetoric and get to the truth. When things are bad, I won't sugar coat them and I won't exaggerate just to suit an agenda. I will approach this deficit and tax debate with an eye toward balancing the obligations of the state with the burden placed on tax payers.

A fair solution is just around the corner if the Legislature and Governor are willing to work together. Objectively, both sides are closer than anyone is willing to admit.

Closer to home, I am very pleased with the tremendous response from this column. I have received comments by letter, e-mail, telephone and in person. Thanks for reading and sharing your opinions. Once the session and committee schedules are set later this month, I'll start district office hours in both Hastings and Ionia. I hope to glean even more local input then. Keep the communication coming!

Brian Calley is representative for the 87th District in the Michigan House of Representatives. Residents can contact him at (517) 373-0842 or through e-mail at briancalley@house.mi.gov.

January 21, 2007

Bush to Urge New Tax Plan for Health Care Coverage

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#) and [ROBERT PEAR](#)

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20 — President Bush intends to use his State of the Union address Tuesday to tackle the rising cost of health care with a one-two punch: tax breaks to help low-income people buy health insurance and tax increases for some workers whose health plans cost significantly more than the national average.

White House officials say Mr. Bush has decided to forgo the traditional formula for the State of the Union — a laundry list of ideas, many of them dead on arrival — in favor of a more thematic speech that will concentrate on a few issues, like health care, [immigration](#) and energy, on which he hopes to make gains with the new Democrat-controlled Congress.

The basic concept is that employer-provided health insurance, now treated as a fringe benefit exempt from taxation, would no longer be entirely tax-free. Workers could be taxed if their coverage exceeded limits set by the government. But the government would also offer a new tax deduction for people buying health insurance on their own.

“I will propose a tax reform designed to help make basic private insurance more affordable,” Mr. Bush said in his weekly radio address on Saturday, “whether you get it through your job or on your own.” He did not offer specifics, but an administration official provided details of the plan.

The proposed plan is a startling move for a president who has repeatedly vowed not to raise taxes. And it is certain to run into opposition from business groups, labor unions and, most of all, the Democrats who now run Capitol Hill.

“It’s a bad policy,” Representative [Charles B. Rangel](#), the New York Democrat who is chairman of the House committee that writes tax legislation, said in an interview Friday night. “We are trying to bring tax relief to the middle class. The president is trying to increase their tax liability. This proposal is inconsistent with what the majority is seeking in the House and the Senate.”

White House officials say the health tax plan would neither increase spending nor reduce tax revenues. Supporters say it would expand coverage to some of the 47 million uninsured. But critics say it would, in effect, tax people with insurance to provide coverage to those without it.

That would amount to a tectonic shift in the way people get and pay for their health coverage, and historically it has been all but impossible to win Congressional approval for such changes. When President [Ronald Reagan](#) made a proposal similar to Mr. Bush’s in 1986, it died in Congress, with Mr. Rangel helping to lead the opposition.

As he heads into the address, his first delivered to a Congress controlled entirely by Democrats, Mr. Bush faces intense skepticism from lawmakers over his new strategy in Iraq. But while he will not be able to avoid the subject of Iraq in the speech, White House officials hope to use the address to shift the national conversation away from the war and toward the possibility of bipartisan cooperation in Washington.

“What they want to accomplish is to have the average American believe that Bush really does want to work across party lines and he’s going to do it,” said one Republican strategist close to the White House.

In his radio address on Saturday, Mr. Bush described his proposal as a way to “treat health insurance more like home ownership,” giving people tax deductions for their health insurance in much the same way as they get tax deductions for home mortgage interest. He said the current system “unwisely encourages workers to choose overly expensive, gold-plated plans,” driving up the overall cost of coverage and care.

The federal government does without tens of billions of dollars each year in potential tax revenue by making health coverage tax-free. The idea of limiting such tax-free coverage has circulated in various forms for more than two decades and is “quite controversial,” said Dr. [Mark B. McClellan](#), a former White House economist and Medicare administrator, who has consulted with Bush officials on the plan.

“The conventional wisdom is that there would be too much political opposition to propose” such limits, Dr. McClellan said.

In preparation for the president’s speech, the White House has been shopping the idea around Capitol Hill, trying to sound out lawmakers like Senator [Charles E. Grassley](#) of Iowa, the senior Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, and Senator [Ron Wyden](#), Democrat of Oregon.

The administration official said Mr. Wyden’s plan contained tax provisions similar to the one proposed by the president. But in an interview, Mr. Wyden was skeptical. He said any tax changes must be coupled with regulations that would encourage private insurance companies to offer affordable coverage to people with pre-existing health conditions.

“The market is broken,” Mr. Wyden said. “Private insurance companies cherry-pick. They’re trying to take just healthy people and send fragile people over to government programs more fragile than they are, and I’m not sure what this does to fix the broken market.”

The [Census Bureau](#) estimates that 175 million Americans obtain private health insurance through employers, while 27 million people are covered by insurance bought outside the workplace. The rest, with the exception of the 47 million uninsured, are covered through government programs like Medicare and Medicaid and military health care.

Under Mr. Bush’s proposal, people buying health insurance on their own would receive a tax break similar to the one that has historically been available to people who receive coverage through their jobs. The plan is tied to the average cost of family health coverage, which is currently \$11,500 a year.

It would work like this: The administration would cap the amount of benefits that can remain tax free at \$15,000 for a family and \$7,500 for an individual. Anyone whose health insurance cost more than that would pay taxes on the difference. For example, a family with coverage costing \$16,000 a year would pay taxes on \$1,000.

The cap would also be used to establish the amount of the new deduction for people who lack coverage. In this example, a family buying insurance on its own could take a \$15,000 deduction — even if the insurance cost less. The cap would rise with some measure of overall inflation, but would not necessarily keep pace with the costs of medical care and health insurance.

A White House official, speaking on condition of anonymity so as not to upstage the president, said, “The vast majority of people

with employer-provided coverage will benefit as well.”

One of the nation’s leading experts on tax policy, C. Eugene Steuerle, a Treasury official in the Reagan administration who is now a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, said the proposal “would probably help increase the number of people with health insurance at no cost to the budget.”

The administration official said the White House envisioned health insurance companies offering new plans to meet a growing market. But employers expressed doubts.

“This is a classic case of robbing Peter to help Paul pay for coverage,” said E. Neil Trautwein, a vice president of the National Retail Federation, which represents retailers of all sizes. “I do not think the president will find many backers in the employer community for this proposal.”

In trying to address the problems of the uninsured, Mr. Trautwein said, “we should not start by endangering coverage for people who already have it.”

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Fifth-grader eager to be part of family

Sunday, January 21, 2007

By Arn Shackelford

The Grand Rapids Press

Editor's note: This is another in a series of articles about special-need children available for adoption.

Eleven-year-old Justin has been in foster care for more than two years, since he was removed from his birth home because of severe abuse and neglect.

Although he's still in therapy, dealing with feelings left from those earlier turbulent years, he's ready for adoption.

"Ready and more than willing," Justin's caseworker said. "He really wants to be part of a permanent family. It's just that he's frustrated now, because he feels like he's in limbo and it's not ever going to happen."

In the fifth grade, Justin does well in school, particularly enjoying his arts and science classes.

Diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, he takes medication to help him focus on his studies and stay on track.

"But he's making so much progress that they're actually decreasing his meds," the worker said.

"This is a kid who eventually can go on to college, he's doing so well. Right now, he's in a perfect situation, with his teacher as his foster parent. He needs someone to be his advocate at school."

Justin likes school, especially the social interaction with his many friends. He loves to read, too, but must learn to pick age-level books, as he sometime struggles with reading comprehension in more difficult subjects.

He also loves sports. Justin played soccer in the fall and is looking forward to being on his school's basketball team this winter. Sports opened a new world for Justin, one that he really feels at home in.

His worker will consider either a single- or two-parent home for Justin, but says he'll do best with both male and female role models. Justin also needs parents who can give him "a good amount of attention, something he's never really had before."

He'll also do best in a family where he's the youngest child, has his own room and possibly a pet of his own.

If yours is the right family for a special boy, if you can open your home -- and your heart -- to Justin, call Sandra Grady Gay at Bethany Christian Services, 224-7512, or write to her at 901 Eastern Ave. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503.

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Parents' love knows no borders

Overseas adoption rules get tougher but...

January 20, 2007

BY SHABINA S. KHATRI, GINA DAMRON and SUZETTE HACKNEY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Jaime Dean is a mother without a child.

After more than a year of hoping, praying and waiting, the 26-year-old Flint resident and her husband, Philip, legally adopted their 7-month-old son in December. But the couple is still waiting to bring Lincoln Joshua José Dean home from Guatemala.

Still, the Deans are lucky. Their son may be home in a few weeks.

Many other couples haven't been as fortunate. Interest in international adoptions remains high, but the number of actual adoptions is declining for the first time in more than a decade. They fell to 20,679 in 2006 from 22,728 in 2005, the State Department says, because of the growing bureaucratic hurdles many foreign countries are placing on the process.

Among recent changes to international adoption policies:

- To adopt from China, starting in May, a couple will have to be married for at least two years, be between the ages of 30 and 50, and have a net worth of \$80,000 or more. They also must not be obese or have mental health issues.
- Russia implemented new regulations in 2006 that require all foreign adoption agencies to be registered with the Ministry of Justice. The slowdown in adoptions in 2006 is attributed to agencies having to meet new criteria to obtain accreditation.
- Guatemala is one of the countries that will have to be in compliance if the United States ratifies the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoptions, which requires expensive reforms that affect the processing of adoptions. It includes assuring the adoption is legal and that the children are not exploited or sold.

The restrictions by these once-favored countries have some adoption agencies expanding their reach as they learn how to help families adopt from countries such as Nepal, Ethiopia and Bulgaria.

Big changes ahead for adoptions

Some of the proposed changes could affect Jeannine Caesar and her husband, Tim Keffer, if they adopt from China again.

The Royal Oak couple, who initiated the process to adopt daughter Peyton Keffer six months before she was born, brought their daughter home in June. But because they are in their mid-40s, they may be considered too old to adopt after China's regulations take effect in May.

For the Deans, in their 20s, Guatemala was an attractive option because the procedure carried fewer restrictions.

"We chose Guatemala because you can get a younger child that way," said Jaime Dean, who visited the country and met her son for the first time last fall. "We fell in love with the country when we went down to visit after 8 months in the process."

In 2006, Guatemala overtook Russia for the No. 2 spot on the State Department's overseas adoption list.

Even with the complications, some international adoption advocates say the new guidelines

are a good thing. Tom DiFilipo, president and CEO of the Joint Council on International Children's Services, said that some countries are trying to refocus their policies to create better child welfare systems.

"They're reassessing the criteria that they use to evaluate prospective parents," he said. "The regulations are increasing, so it's become more cumbersome in a sense. But, we believe these are good things."

DiFilipo said that countries like China and Russia are focusing on creating better foster care and domestic adoption programs. But, he said, international adoptions are still strong.

Still, some say prospective parents may take their business to countries where adoptions are faster, such as Vietnam, Taiwan and Kazakhstan. The adoption process, however, is lengthy for most countries. It can range from an average of 10 months in Guatemala to 12 months in Haiti to 18 months in Russia, DiFilipo said.

Other countries gain favor

Cathy Eisenberg of Child & Parent Services Inc. in Bingham Farms, said that more people are opting for overseas adoptions rather than domestic ones because the process is easier. She said that with domestic adoptions of infants, for instance, prospective parents have to be chosen by a birth mother and wait for the baby's parents to sever their parental rights before an adoption can occur.

That's not so overseas. Interest in certain countries may be attributed to attention drawn from adoptions by celebrities like Madonna and Angelina Jolie. But, that's not the only reason, DiFilipo said.

"When Romanian adoptions skyrocketed a decade ago, it was because the media here went over and highlighted the terrible conditions the children were living in," he said. "It's not just because it's Madonna. It's the fact that there's an awareness brought to American society, and they respond to it."

Countries like Ukraine, with its simpler, more efficient adoption system, is becoming a favorite over Russia for couples like Bill and Kelly Woods of Ypsilanti. Not wanting to expose their children to questions about their ethnic background left the Woodses with two options -- Eastern Europe or domestic adoption.

"Domestic was a little crazy -- parental rights are too strong," said Woods, 33, on Thursday. "There are lots of stories about parents coming back and reclaiming custody of their children."

The price of adopting children from Ukraine also is slightly cheaper -- the costs of adopting the siblings that the Woodses brought home two weeks ago totaled about \$30,000.

Adoptions from China average about \$20,000 per child, \$25,000 to \$30,000 in Guatemala, and \$30,000 in Russia, said Eisenberg, from Child & Parent Services Inc. in Bingham Farms.

Children are worth the wait

Despite the obstacles, including mounds of paperwork and long bouts of waiting, the three couples said that once the adoption process was complete and their new children were home, the agony of the wait quickly faded.

"Everyone's got the sun shining down on their stroller," said 46-year-old Caesar, laughing and then growing teary-eyed. "It's a state of nirvana. You don't remember -- it totally goes away, like childbirth. You can't remember the pain of childbirth."

And so goes the angst of waiting.

Contact **SHABINA S. KHATRI** at 586-469-8087 or skhatri@freepress.com.

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Student in Trouble for Bringing Gun to School

Jan 21, 2007 10:27 AM EST

A prosecutor says a 14-year-old boy accused of bringing a loaded handgun to a western Michigan school will be charged in juvenile court. The Ludington eighth grader was suspended indefinitely after the revolver was found Monday.

Mason County Prosecutor Susan K. Sniegowski says she has authorized charges of carrying a concealed weapon and carrying a dangerous weapon with unlawful intent. The police chief declined to comment on why the boy had the gun.

At least one student told a teacher that the boy might have a gun. The assistant principal searched the boy's backpack stored in his locker, and found the pistol.



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January 22, 2007

Deb Price

U.S. must do better for homeless, runaway gay teens



By the time Danny was 7 years old, he was already trapped in the tragic downward spiral that homeless gay teenagers so often describe when talking about how they found themselves living on the streets.

Danny was shoved from one foster home to another and repeatedly molested. He spent two years in a juvenile correctional facility. At 17, he tried living with his aunt, but she soon ordered him to get his "gay ass" out of her house.

Homeless, Danny got cash by reading people's tarot cards and a place to sleep by having "survival sex."

"I'd go to the library. I'd get on (Internet sites where men were seeking sex partners), just to find somewhere to sleep for the night, not for money. I slept with them so I could have a place to stay," he explained.

Danny's story is told in "An Epidemic of Homelessness," an alarming report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless that collects the best research on homeless gay youth and combines it with accounts of the few projects that are successfully addressing the problem. (Read it at thetaskforce.org.)

An appalling number of young people -- as many as 1.6 million, the federal government estimates -- are homeless or runaways. And even though a small fraction of teens are gay, more than 40 percent of homeless youth are gay, the National Runaway Switchboard finds.

The new report is a wakeup call for lawmakers and social service agencies: So much hostility and violence are directed at gay teens in foster care, homeless shelters or correctional facilities that many conclude they're safer living on a sidewalk. Our nation is failing these kids.

The federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act needs to be renewed and better funded, as the report suggests, and Uncle Sam needs to focus on the reasons gay teens are at much higher risk for homelessness.

But this isn't just a government problem. Every American adult ought to hear the horrifying numbers in this report as a wakeup call to work harder to make our society more tolerant of diversity. One-quarter of homeless gay youth are throwaways -- teenagers thrown out of their homes because of their sexual orientation. As James, another teen profiled in the report, was told by his mother, "You're going to be straight or you're not going to live here anymore."

Plenty of kids living on the streets ran away from home to escape being beaten for being gay. Helping to create a society that teaches parents that every child deserves a loving home is up to every adult, not just those of us who're gay. (Any parent needing help in coming to terms with a gay child should contact P-FLAG at 866-627-9749.)

Some gay kids wandering the streets eventually find a drop-in center or shelter that is supportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth, such as the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, Waltham House near Boston and Urban Peak in Denver. James made it to Waltham House. And Danny finally has a place to call home, Urban Peak.

The way America treats gay children whose parents are unwilling or unable to care for them is a national disaster. We must do better.

Reach Deb Price at (202) 662-8736 or dprice@detnews.com.

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Article published Jan 19, 2007

Expo to expose needy to nonprofit services

A social services and nonprofit resources expo, Project Homeless Connect, will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. Jan. 31 at St. Joseph Catholic Church, 924 E. Second St., in conjunction with the God Works! soup kitchen dinner hosted Wednesday nights by the parish.

In addition to the free dinner, which usually has an attendance of 100 to 120 people, there will be children's activities, door prizes and displays and information from many of the local organizations that help Monroe County's homeless, unemployed and needy. Those who need transportation to the dinner can call 241-2775, ext. 220.

There is no income qualification or reservations needed for God Works! dinners or this event.

The goal, said Jeff Weaver, president and founder of God Works!, is to let local residents know "what these agencies can do for them and what these agencies can offer."

There have been information booths and presentations from local agencies at previous God Works! dinners, which are held every night of the week at different locations in Monroe. But this is the biggest such event in the history of the program.

"It's not something I foresaw when I started this," Mr. Weaver said about the outreach efforts.

But he added it does fit in well with his group's mission of feeding the hungry. And he said it can be difficult for agencies and organizations that are able to provide assistance to let potential clients know what's available, what's new or how to apply for their services. Those who attend the dinners often are the same people that other agencies are trying to help.

Agencies and organizations that are scheduled to have representatives or information tables at the event include Lake Erie Transit Services, Michigan Works!, Family Medical Center, Monroe County Opportunity Program, Department of Human Services, Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service, Legal Services of South Central Michigan, Monroe Family YMCA, Monroe County Health Department, Salvation Army, United Way of Monroe County, Mercy Memorial Hospital, Monroe County Community College, Monroe County Library System, Trinity Lutheran Church, Philadelphia House and God Works!

The sponsors are the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, Corporation for Supportive Housing and Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness.

The national Project Homeless Connect began in San Francisco as a one-day, one-stop event to promote housing, services and hospitality to people who are homeless. It is similar to the outreach efforts done across the country to assist Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

More than 70 cities have adopted this concept, according to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. Some cities also have included Project Homeless Connect as part of their 10-year plan to address homelessness in their communities.

Lansing State Journal Editorial

January 20, 2007

Earning their wages

"That's politics" is the only explanation we can come up with for a vote in Congress recently.

Before the new U.S. House was a bill to raise the federal minimum wage to \$7.25, from the \$5.15 level where it's rested for years. The bill passed the House, if not mid-Michigan.

Three of the region's four congressmen (Republicans Mike Rogers, Tim Walberg and Dave Camp) voted against the raise. Rep. Vern Ehlers voted for it.

From that vote, you would assume mid-Michigan is against a minimum-wage increase. Yet we failed to detect any such opposition when the Republican-led Michigan Legislature approved its own wage increase last year; an increase that will eventually take the state's bottom wage above the proposed federal level.

So, does mid-Michigan believe a wage increase is bad and that the Legislature erred? Or did these three congressmen cast an unpopular vote thinking the repercussions are nil since the state's wage is rising anyway?

Maybe we should start members of Congress at the \$5.15 minimum wage, until they develop the experience and skills to be worth more.

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January 21, 2007

Nolan Finley

Students pay for Granholm's fiddling



Here's how I predict the march to raise your state taxes will proceed: With the state budget deficit now at \$810 million and growing like Jack's beanstalk, the solution for balancing the budget will be to slash school spending by up to \$220 per pupil.

A cut of that size will devastate many school districts and push a few that are teetering on bankruptcy over the edge. Nearly every district will have to lay off teachers, increase class size, drop beloved programs, charge for sports and limit bus service.

And parents will howl, just like they're supposed to. Apply the pain of the budget deficit to the voters' most tender spot and you just may soften them up for accepting higher taxes.

It seems inevitable, since Michigan's leaders still don't have a clue about what needs to be done to deliver us from this never-ending crisis.

Michigan needs courage and creativity, but instead it gets indifference.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has fiddled for four years while the state burns. She's done too little to adjust the structure of government to the reality of shrinking revenue.

The state today spends more in actual dollars than it did four years ago. Employment has been cut some, but not nearly enough. The state operates in essentially the same way it did when Granholm took over, with the same departments delivering the same services in the same way.

Viable suggestions for doing things differently are on the table, but are ignored.

The governor has done nothing to address the soaring cost of teacher health insurance, for example, even though some estimates place the potential annual savings of bringing more competition to the system at \$500 million or more.

Granholm called on the state's numerous school districts to consolidate in her first term, but did nothing to force the issue.

Corrections spending is out of control. More than a third of the state's 52,000 employees work for the prison system. And yet the governor has done nothing to adopt less expensive options for nonviolent offenders.

The governor in her first term derailed welfare reform that could have saved millions of dollars, and only recently accepted the legislation after it was watered down to pointlessness.

You'd think at the very least a budget hole of this magnitude would demand a hiring freeze for all but essential workers.

But the governor continues to lard up the state payroll with political hires.

Nancy Skinner, the failed Democratic challenger to U.S. Rep. Joe Knollenberg in last fall's election, was hired as First Gentleman Dan Mulhern's chief of staff at \$80,000 a year. Mulhern doesn't have a paid job with the state, but he has a paid staff of three that now includes a political operative.

Granholm also found room in the state's meager budget for Andy Levin, son of U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, who lost his bid for a state Senate seat.

And at least five defeated or term-limited lawmakers are back on the state payroll.

This is your tax money at work. Think about how it's being spent before you think about sending another dime of it to Lansing.

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January 22, 2007

Child support streamlined

Robert Snell / The Detroit News

Parents in Wayne County can start using debit cards early next month to access child-support payments.

The cards, which are being used in other Michigan counties and states such as Iowa and Ohio, will help eliminate payment delays due to returned mail, and avoid problems with lost or stolen checks and check-cashing fees, officials said. There are about 130,000 cards being used statewide and Wayne is the last county to start using them.

Marilyn Stephen, director of the Office of Child Support in the Michigan Department of Human Services, will unveil the cards at 9:30 a.m. today at the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center.

About 20,000 cards will be mailed to Wayne County, which has the largest number of support cases statewide. Of the \$1.4 billion in child support payments made each year in Michigan, about 70 percent come from Wayne.

The cards, which save the state about \$1 million a year in check-printing and mailing costs, are part of a 2005 state law requiring all child-support payments be distributed electronically, either by direct-deposits or on a debit card. The state automatically deposits the support payments directly to the cards.

The debit card has been embraced by DADS of Michigan, a Bloomfield Hills-based group that promotes parental involvement in the lives of children.

The debit card eliminates delays in mailing checks and some problems with late payments, said Jim Semerad, chairman of the group's political action committee.

For example, military personnel serving overseas have had problems receiving child-support checks, Semerad said. A debit card solves that problem, he said.

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News Release

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Child support payments in Wayne County going electronic

January 22, 2007

DETROIT – The DHS Office of Child Support, in coordination with the Friend of the Court in Wayne County, today announced it will begin disbursing child support payments electronically. A new law requires all child support payments to be electronically disbursed either by direct deposit into a personal checking/savings account or to a debit card.

Wayne County is the final county to implement the changes because it has the largest number of custodial parents receiving child support payments. The program was implemented in Michigan's other 82 counties through a rollout process during 2006.

Customers who currently receive paper checks in these counties have received information in the mail and were given the choice of direct deposit to their checking/savings account or to a debit card. Paper child support checks will no longer be sent out to customers unless they meet the hardship exceptions described in the law.

"There are many advantages for customers and for the state," said Marilyn Stephen, director of DHS Office of Child Support. "For customers, direct deposit eliminates delays waiting for checks in the mail, prevents lost or stolen checks, and avoids check cashing fees. For the state, electronic payments are less costly to process; that's a benefit to Michigan taxpayers."

Before implementation of the law, about 30 percent of child support recipients in the state had their payments directly deposited into their personal checking or savings account. Customers currently participating in direct deposit are not required to switch to the debit card.

Many Wayne County residents have chosen to receive their payments via direct deposit to their bank account, while others will receive theirs via the new VISA debit cards. The VISA debit cards, which will be issued at no cost to customers, can be used like any other bank or credit union debit card at millions of locations that accept VISA debit cards without incurring any fees. Customers can also get cash back with purchases from any of over 29,000 Interlink merchants in Michigan, again without fees. Customers choosing to access debit card funds using an automated teller machine (ATM) will be subject to ATM fees.

In states with electronic disbursement already in place, about two-thirds of customers choose direct deposit to checking/savings and one-third choose direct deposit to debit cards. For Wayne County child support customers who would like to choose direct deposit but do not have a bank account, several financial institutions have agreed to waive various fees. In addition, these financial institutions will be at the Wayne County Friend of the Court offices, Penobscot Building, 645 Griswold, from January 22 to February 2 to assist customers with opening an account.

For more information on electronic disbursement of child support go to the child support section of the DHS Web site, www.michigan.gov/dhs or to www.misdu.com.

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